

*Remarks of the Honorable Anne-Imelda Radice,
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“Picturing America”
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AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY*

Ambassador Oliver, Chairman Cole, Dignitaries and Friends. We have just heard about a program that I would venture to say will become a gold standard of what should and can be done in the realm of cultural diplomacy. It demonstrates the highest quality of scholarship and presentation. It stands on its own without a special context. It shows different historical periods of American creativity and the examples used often depict periods of American history which were challenging and not always shining. It is the work of honest chroniclers who tell a story based on art. Its international educational and aesthetic content and appeal, in my opinion, safely avoid the label of propaganda.

Why is that important? Allow me to try to answer with some observations as a person who has participated very modestly in the American cultural scene. As a practitioner and not an expert, I feel these observations may have some value for the members of the international public — the audience, in fact, that we all seek when we try to create bi-lateral and multi-lateral alliances. In the interests of full disclosure, I must state that I was at USIA at the end of the 1980's and, among my many responsibilities, was the so-called “Artistic Ambassadors” program which some of you will remember with a smile.

Literature about cultural policy in the international realm is varied but I would recommend reading Ardt's book, the observations by Dr. Cynthia Schneider of Georgetown, and any and all government reports about various cultural commissions and their recommendations.

American cultural diplomacy – and I will avoid a precise definition of that term for now -- dates back to the Founding Fathers of the nation. James Madison, speaking in Paris on Sept 20, 1785, said: “You see I am an enthusiast on the subject of the arts. But it is an enthusiasm of which I am not ashamed, as its object is to improve the taste of my countrymen, to increase their reputation, to reconcile to them the respect of the world, and procure them its praise.” This is rather straightforward and, most importantly, boldly emphasizes that success, another subjective term, is based on two-way activity: that the citizens of the U.S. benefit directly and that we have something to learn. Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, of course, were other celebrated practitioners of this form of statecraft in that era.

But “modern” cultural diplomacy began as an international partnership to battle the horrors of the Axis powers in the 20th Century. This was the time of the birth of the British Council and the strengthening of the French Ministry of Culture. I think we would all recognize that cultural diplomacy in those days was primarily about providing information -- positive propaganda, if you will, to battle what was a growing threat to the world, Nazism.

Words are often parsed in the annals of American cultural diplomacy. A significant part of the recorded history of that form of diplomacy involves juxtapositions and interpretations of terms like education, aesthetics and information vs. culture and propaganda. The frequent annual challenges to -- and eventual disbanding of -- USIA was in part based on this battle of nomenclature and which groups within the governmental structure could get the “objectives” -- another loaded term -- of the period most effectively accomplished.

President Roosevelt sought to have cultural diplomacy take on a bi-partisan approach with the appointment of Nelson Rockefeller as a cultural representative charged with reaching out to Latin and South America. Rockefeller often clashed with other government officials concerned with foreign cultural interests because he unabashedly tied commercial interests to cultural exchanges. However, he was courageous and bold and, when needed, privately funded exhibitions of modern art. As America moved into the 1950's and the horrendous McCarthy debacle, such entrepreneurial endeavors became shining moments in an otherwise bleak environment.

In the 1950's, a more visible Central Intelligence Agency had a well-known role in cultural diplomacy publishing and disseminating materials for use abroad. It was also the time when President Eisenhower, who had established a very important international component at Columbia University while he served as its president, took that experience to his national presidency.

And we also witnessed the birth of what I call “The Acronyms,” those bureaus, departments, agencies, commissions, study groups, etc., all defined by initials -- a list too staggering to name here.

One thing that is always clear in the push/pull of cultural program continuation is that adversity, especially the fear of wars and the lack of clearly defined positions, are often the inspirations that have moved our government to spend more time, expertise, and funds abroad telling the American story and strengthening our international relationships. When such serious challenges retreat, so, regrettably, has our uni-lateral engagement.

We also have a government structure that does not have a centralized cultural operation or a minister of culture. Our cultural contributions are, however, scattered throughout some excellent agencies including The National Endowment for the Humanities, The Institute of Museum and Library Services, The National Endowment for the Arts, The Library of Congress, The State Department, etc. Although there have been international coordinated efforts with very specific goals, such as the teaching of English and even formal agreements with our British friends about what kind of English should be taught worldwide (American informal vs. British formal) in general, cultural visibility or invisibility -- the sharing of the American cultural identity and ideals -- have often been directly related to the ingenuity of individual cultural attaches and non-governmental participants -- those involved in exchanges, either formally or informally.

In the 1950's and 1960's, a conscious effort was made to recruit experts and, often, younger scholars. Those were heady times with the likes of a David McCullough or a Paul and Julia Child representing American culture in far-flung outposts.

This was also the time that gave birth to the Fulbright Exchange Program, which the late Senator Fulbright said had to remain bi-partisan. So many positive human experiences have resulted from this important program -- too many to count and, most, quite wonderful.

When I sought advice about what I should say today I had a valuable conversation with the Deputy Librarian of Congress, Deanna Marcum. As I left her office, she entrusted me with a small piece of the Berlin Wall, which she said I should use as a muse and even bring here today. We all remember that day. We remember what led up to it, beginning with President John F. Kennedy's powerful declaration "Ich Bin Ein Berliner." To my mind that was a declaration of identification with others from a different culture...that we understood each other as members of the same humanity. Then, there came the inspiring challenge of President Ronald Reagan: "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" Neither speech would have been possible without the work of the cultural representatives and organized programs abroad and, especially, one of those critical programs -- the sharing of jazz, a truly American art form, worldwide.

And, today, I hold a very small piece of that Wall in my hand. How unthinkable that would have been a few short decades ago. Here it is encased in plastic almost like a religious relic, representing hatred broken down one little piece at a time.

We must continue to let artists and the arts represent us. "Creativity," as Wilhelmina Holladay, founder of the NMWA, recently said to me, "is our only salvation. It unites not divides. It captures our hearts and souls." U.S. cultural diplomacy has had many moments like that. We witness one today.

Without getting bogged down in the rhetoric of official statements, or agency acronyms, or the life and death cycles of government programs, let me cite what makes cultural diplomacy work:

First: Recognize that the most far-reaching cultural diplomacy should simply be the sharing of cultural experiences, artistic work, and good will that flows both ways across borders. We do not have to sacrifice cultural and national identities to understand, enjoy, and respect other cultures.

Second: Let us speak of quality. We should not engage in trying to give only quantitative values for why we need to have cultural diplomacy. We should not have to use official reports that use phrases like "combat the forces of darkness." Yes, there actually is a public document that uses this phrase to justify sending a noted music group abroad.

Third: We must always recognize that one person can make a difference. I would suspect that Louis Armstrong did more for the American image abroad, if you will, with one song and one smile than, well, you fill in the blanks.

Fourth: We must continue to respect and believe that we should identify with people not regimes, and not punish people because of the unfortunate government structures under which they may live. As Thomas Jefferson said: "We must show a decent respect for the opinions of mankind." That kind of respect is evident here today -- with "Picturing America?"

It is easy for me to hold this piece of the Berlin Wall in my hand. It is tiny but powerful. It represents millions of blows against a hard surface in an era when film footage -- and by today's standards, relatively few photographs -- etched in our consciousness a world-changing event.

Today, technology produces billions of instant reactions, instant images...usually without context or exchanges on a human level. So, now we have a new kind of wall that is more insidious because it wraps around people as well as divides them. Ignorance of others, fear of cultural difference, lack of mutual respect are some of the nearly invisible fibers that make up this wall. However, I continue to hope and we all continue to work as individuals, to try and reach through this wall and to share cultures...one-on-one. We can, indeed, see each other through this wall. Perhaps then, we need to have faith in the humanity that stands across from us -- different, but maybe not so different at all.

Today, we celebrate what we hope can be a step forward in creating a new era of global respect and understanding -- the kind that Thomas Jefferson spoke of more than two centuries ago.

Again, congratulations to you, Mr. Chairman, for clarity of vision and quality that stands alone. And, thank you, Madame Ambassador, for your leadership and humanity.